

**Testimony of Dr. Margie B. Gillis,
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SB 1054 An Act Concerning Students with Dyslexia
March 11, 2015**

Representative Fleischmann, Senator Slossberg, and Members of the Education Committee, I am presenting written testimony in favor of SB 1054, **An Act Concerning Students with Dyslexia**. I thank the committee for raising the bill and for your support of legislation that promotes high quality evidence-based reading instruction for our dyslexic population. I have presented testimony – both written and in person – all with a common theme – that is, to urge the state department of education and the legislature to work closely together to protect our most vulnerable children. Many of these children don't read well. One subgroup is comprised of children who qualify for a diagnosis of dyslexia. The problem is neurobiological and **can be detected and treated at a very young age**. Unfortunately, most educators, including school psychologists who must identify the specific learning disability, don't know the warning signs and lack the knowledge and expertise to treat it. If dyslexia isn't recognized early, the treatment becomes more complex and more costly – costly in terms of dollars and even more significant in terms of the emotional fall-out when the disability isn't recognized and treated adequately.

For 15 years I taught children and adults with dyslexia to read. It required years of study and coursework, many hours of supervised instruction, and hundreds of hours of experience teaching children who presented with different strengths and weaknesses. After careful thought, I decided to leave the special education world behind in order to provide professional development for general education teachers. I left because I believed that I would have a greater impact on children if I could work with teachers to empower them with knowledge and skills. Over the course of fifteen years working in schools around the state, I have seen first-hand that teachers are not adequately prepared to diagnostically assess and prescriptively teach children fundamental reading skills. Dyslexia's core deficit is in the area of phonological processing. In layperson's language, these individuals have difficulty processing (i.e., hearing and understanding) the sounds that make up words. Although most K-3 educators know the term ***phonemic awareness*** and some can even define it, they don't understand it well enough to teach it explicitly, effectively, and to mastery. Of the hundreds of teachers we've surveyed over the past 15 years, the average score on a test that demonstrates their understanding of the concept is **50%**. This means that most teachers don't know how to recognize when children struggle to master that all-important skill and equally important, they don't know how to teach the skill properly. And this is just one of many key concepts that teachers must master to be skilled practitioners. (And by the way, the teacher knowledge data is similar in terms of mastery levels for many of the other key concepts that teachers should know).

We must do a better job of identifying students with dyslexia and we must provide optimal instruction provided by exemplary teachers. This bill has some important language but must be expanded to include what diagnosis and instruction should look like and what teacher qualifications should include to meet our children's needs. Please consider adding language to the bill to ensure that all of our students get the instruction they need and are entitled to in order to become proficient readers by third grade.